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ABSTRACT

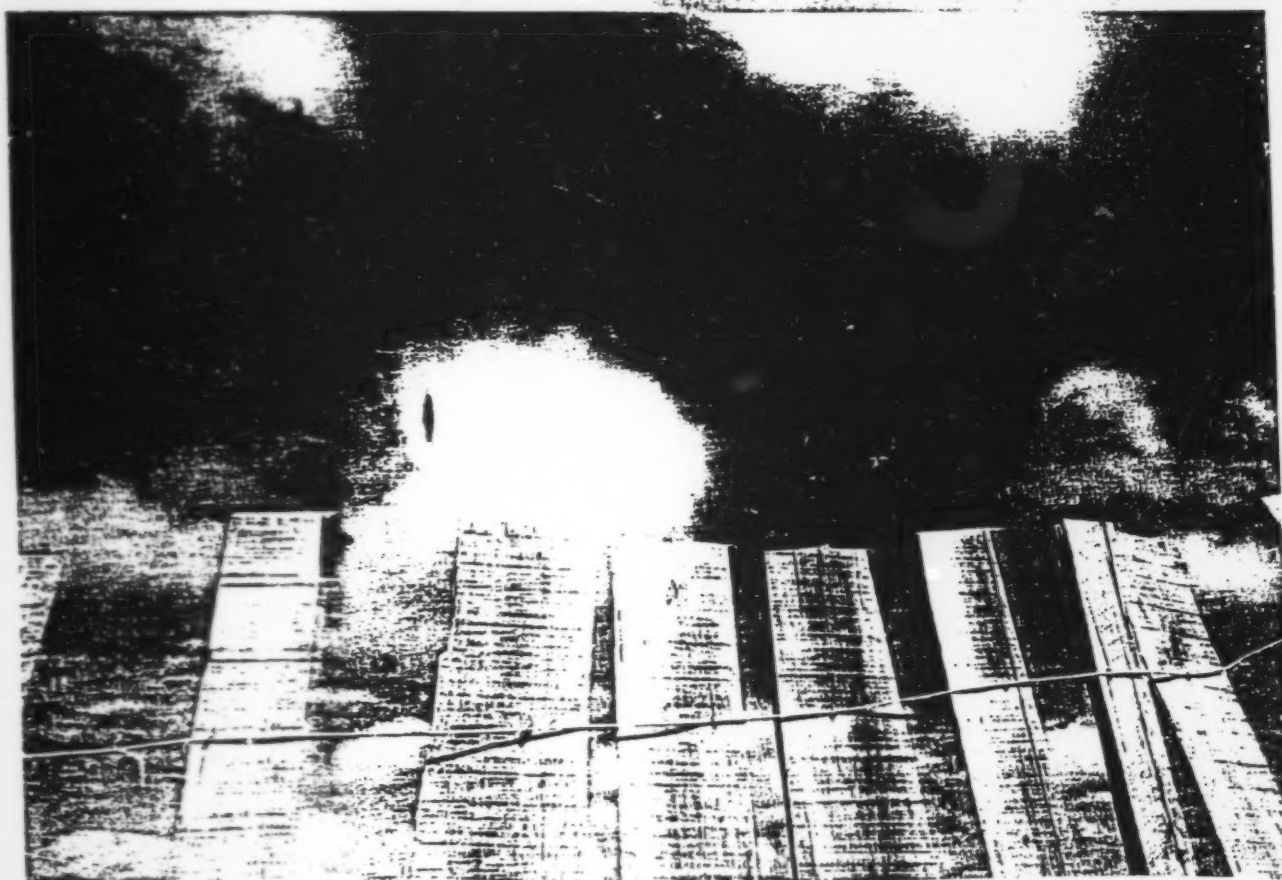
This booklet presents the stories of several students who were the first generation in their families to go to college, in order to dramatize the door-opening, life-changing power of Pell Grants and related student assistance. These stories synthesize interviews with more than 20 low- and moderate-income students who could not have attended postsecondary school without significant financial aid. Interviewees were asked about the social history of their educational experiences; about the barriers they faced in getting to college; about the social, emotional, and financial barriers to attaining a postsecondary degree; and about how they overcame these barriers. Their stories center on six key themes: early awareness of higher education and the availability of financial aid; the ability to break from family patterns; the importance of peers; the critical role of mentors and college outreach; the desire for personal growth and enhanced self-esteem; and the importance of early college success and goal setting. After presenting a brief historical overview of the democratization of higher education, the booklet lets the narratives speak to the six themes. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

From Rusty Wire Fences to Wrought-Iron Gates

*How the Poor Succeed in
Getting to—and Through—College*

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POLICY PERSPECTIVES

FROM RUSTY WIRE FENCES TO WROUGHT-IRON GATES

*How the Poor Succeed in
Getting to—and Through—College*

Beth Macy

The College Board
Washington, D.C.

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The Washington Office of the College Board conducts policy analysis that supports the Board's mission of educational equity and excellence for all students. Our aim is to spark constructive debate and produce accessible, reliable information and analysis for state and federal policymakers, College Board constituents, educators, the media, and the public. We do this by collecting reference data on key issues, conducting and publishing research, commissioning papers, sponsoring conferences, and presenting legislative testimony.

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PREFACE

In 1997 the College Board held a conference at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Pell Grant program. It was a policy seminar, with plenty of statistics and analytical papers on the past and future of federal initiatives to broaden access to postsecondary education. But the inspiration, the highlight of the conference, was provided by several current and former Pell Grant recipients who were the first generation in their families to go to college. Their stories dramatized the door-opening, life-changing power of Pell Grants and related student assistance.

Beth Macy is an award-winning writer who has devoted much of the past year to documenting such stories. She has been working on her own – as a freelance writer and independent scholar — and with the Student Aid Alliance, a group of higher education associations (including the College Board) formed to build support for need-based aid in the nation’s capital.

I first came upon Beth Macy's work a year ago in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In a piece titled "The Scarlet P: Why Pell Grant Holders Aren't Slackers," she challenged the elitist attitudes of some academics toward Pell Grant recipients. Macy writes from the head and the heart – and from personal experience. Herself a first-generation college graduate, she has also taught writing to a range of students, from developmental or "remedial" students at Virginia Western Community College to graduate students at Hollins University. She argued in the *Chronicle* that most of her Pell students were more focused and driven than economically advantaged students, with a lot more riding on the success of their papers than a letter grade or the refinement of their writing skills.

Last spring *College Board Review* editor Paul Barry invited Macy to write a piece on the enduring importance of need-based aid, which appeared in the August 1999 issue.

In this Policy Perspective, we have asked her to shine a light on what makes the difference when first-generation students succeed in college. Financial aid is a critical ingredient, but what are the other keys to success? She draws on an

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expanding folder of case stories to highlight the importance of family, peers, early awareness and goal setting, mentors, and college outreach programs.

The result is both moving and insightful. As Macy says, in the end it's people's dreams, not data, that count.

We are releasing this report in January at ConnectED 2000, a national conference on precollegiate intervention and outreach sponsored by the College Board along with The Education Resources Institute, the James Irvine Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, Council for Opportunity in Education, and a host of other partner organizations.

Ultimately, Beth Macy hopes to write a book on the history of the democratization of American higher education, focusing on the human as well as the political and historical dimensions of expanding opportunity through education. If you would like to become a part of her project, contact her at bmacy@roanoke.infi.net, or log on to the Student Aid Alliance Web site. Many of the case studies she has developed, including those analyzed for this report, can be found in full at www.studentaidalliance.org.

Martin Kramer, Tom Mortenson, Jana Nidiffer, and Tom Wolanin reviewed the manuscript for this report and provided helpful comments and suggestions. Scott Swail advised on content, design, and graphics. Ginny Perrin oversaw the editing and production. Alicia Dorsey assisted on logistics and distribution.

This publication is the second in our Policy Perspectives series from the Washington Office of the College Board. The first, "The Virtual University and Educational Opportunity: Issues of Equity and Access for the Next Generation," was published last spring. The third in the series, "Prepaying and Saving for College: Opportunities and Issues," is scheduled for release in March 2000.

Information about these and other policy studies from the Washington Office can be found at the College Board's Web site (www.collegeboard.org).

Lawrence E. Gladioux
Executive Director for Policy Analysis
The College Board

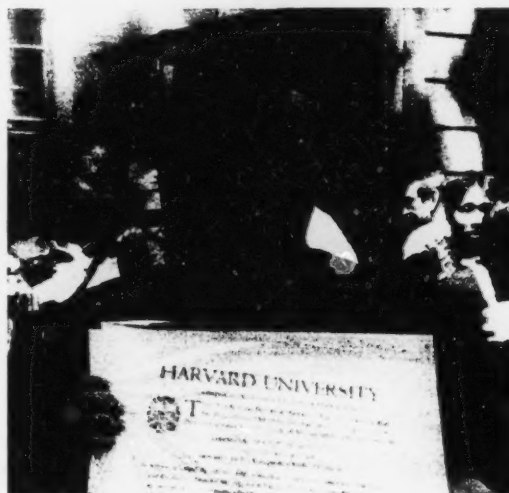
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Theresa Robertson was 4 years old the first time her mother noticed she was gifted. They were driving around their hometown of Roanoke, Virginia, when Theresa read out loud a billboard that said "Southern Refrigeration Corporation."

Both Theresa and her little sister could read before they went to kindergarten. They attended a predominantly black elementary school across from a housing project near their home. "We were always the first to hand in our papers, until eventually the teachers would give us extra work and special projects," Theresa, now 22, recalls.

"Once we got to school and people said to our parents, 'Your kids are smart,' they started thinking, 'If we keep working to foster a good attitude toward education, maybe some day they could go to college—or at least not have to work at McDonald's.'"

"My mom always said, 'If you can do well in college, you can get out,' She was speaking metaphorically, of course, but to me it meant get out of Norwich," the white, working-class neighborhood where the family has lived for decades and where her mother, a hospital receptionist, was raised. Her father is also a Roanoke native, an eighth-grade dropout who drives an oil truck.



Theresa Robertson

No kid from Norwich had ever gone to college before Theresa Robertson came along. Even members of Theresa's own extended family remarked, loudly and frequently: "Cain't no Robertson go to no college."

Fortunately, Theresa's teachers—and her parents—believed otherwise. Her ninth-grade guidance counselor took one look at her grades, assumed she was college material, and signed her up for honors courses. He gave her the schedule for college entrance exams, and mentioned that scholarships and grants were available to promising needy students.

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Theresa finished high school as the class salutatorian with a GPA of 4.18 and an SAT® score of 1400. In her college-application essay, she promised she could overcome the poverty she had grown up in, but she would not forget it. She wrote about her homeless friends who hang out at the neighborhood's Triple-A Discount Corner and the riverbank. She wrote about a friend called "Don the Hatchet Murderer"—explaining that he didn't kill anyone with a hatchet; he just shot them.

Theresa's essay, coupled with her academic record, so impressed admission counselors that she got into every college she applied to: Virginia Tech, Emory University, the University of Virginia, Duke and, finally, Harvard.

A kid from Norwich at Harvard, at a cost of \$32,000 a year? Even Theresa doubted that. Harvard's financial aid package was good, relatively speaking—loans, scholarships, and grants paid most of the first year's costs—but the Robertsons couldn't come up with the remaining \$3,000. When Theresa called Harvard to decline the offer, the financial aid officer "found" some more money; an anonymous donor who'd read of Theresa's talents in her local newspaper paid the rest.

On June 9, 1999—the day before Theresa received her diploma from Harvard University, the day before she was given a dorm-hall award honoring her for "exemplifying what a Harvard student should be"—Theresa's parents gave her two gifts. One was a cross; the other, a ring bearing this inscription: "Against All Odds."

A kid from Norwich had not only clawed her way into the Ivy League, she aced her way out of it.

But as is typical of most low-income, first-generation college students, the journey from rusty wire fences to wrought-iron gates was a long one—filled with potholes, unseen changes in course, and plenty of near misses.

What if the "fairy godmother," as the family calls the anonymous donor, hadn't come through?

What if the private and federal aid hadn't been available to the degree that it was?

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What if Theresa's teachers hadn't nurtured her talents, and her guidance counselor hadn't filled her in on financial aid and scholarships?

What if her mom hadn't taught her the alphabet at age 2, hadn't checked her homework every day, hadn't encouraged her to "get out," hadn't told her to phone Harvard rather than simply send them a note?

Theresa was a confident and poised, albeit poor, young woman when she landed at Harvard in 1995—and even she sometimes felt like an outcast, surrounded by classmates who spoke of summers abroad in Australia and trips to Italy to buy "real Prada."

"I lived with people who

had never been in a Wal-mart," she says. "The Gap, to them, was like

Kmart." She calls herself "*the economic diversity at Harvard*," conceding that sometimes she felt lonely and intimidated. "Sometimes I'd call people from home just to talk to somebody real," she recalls.

A kid from Norwich at Harvard, at a cost of \$32,000 a year? Even Theresa doubted that.

What if Theresa hadn't been able to adapt socially? What if, like so many other poor kids who rarely venture out of the neighborhood they're raised in, she became scared and called it quits?

What if Theresa had been a more typical student—that is, what if she had been bright, but not necessarily "genius material"? Would a moderately smart, but poor, person be academically nurtured to the point of enrolling at a state or community college? Do poor people even know college financial aid exists, and if they don't know, why would they be motivated to pursue a college track?



While much of the debate surrounding the federal role in postsecondary education has focused on trends in student funding, financial aid fraud, and the benefits of grants versus loans, most of the information has come from policy experts and politicians and other people who have honorably dedicated their professional lives to initiating, monitoring, and weighing in on need-based aid.

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But what about the people affected most by these statistics? A window needs to be opened on the issues surrounding higher-education access for poor people—and not by examining numbers and policy trends alone.

I am a first-generation college graduate and a journalist, and I teach essay writing and literary journalism to graduate students at Hollins University. Over the past several months, I have interviewed more than 20 low- and moderate-income college students and graduates. Most are first-generation students, people who could not have attended postsecondary schools at all without significant financial aid.

I asked each interviewee for a social history of their educational experience; to talk about the barriers they faced getting to college; to describe the social, emotional and financial hurdles of attaining a postsecondary degree; and to explain how they jumped those hurdles. I also wanted to know: How, specifically, has college changed your life?

Their stories are as varied and complex as the positions they now occupy, which range from religious leader, social worker, and educator to accountant, medical professional, and military pilot. I have identified six threads, or keys to success, that I will weave around the individuals' stories. They are:

- Early awareness of higher education and financial aid;
- The ability to break from family patterns;
- The importance of peers;
- The critical role of mentors and college outreach;
- The desire for personal growth and enhanced self-esteem;
- And the importance of early college success and goal setting.

A few of my interviewees are still in college—in undergraduate or graduate, public or private schools—although most have already established their careers. Nearly all say postsecondary education has significantly transformed their lives.

Not all of their stories are as dramatic as Theresa Robertson's move from a shotgun house in Norwich to the Harvard dormitory once occupied by John F. Kennedy.

But all of their stories do illustrate, in a profound and inarguable way, the premise underlying the creation of need-based financial aid: that intelligence and creativity are found at every income level. To not assist in developing the intelligence of poor people is not only a loss to the individual, it's a loss to all of us.

The Democratization of Higher Education: A Historical Overview

There was a time in America when the government was not directly involved in expanding access to higher education, a time when only the extremely fortunate could go to college—and only a lucky few could claw their way from poverty to financial comfort through luck, grit, and the support of concerned individuals.

Wayland Thatch died March 27, 1999. He was 79. Although he was not interviewed for this project, his son, Robert Thatch of Kansas City, Missouri, offered his father's story as a rare example from an earlier era—and of the enduring importance of need-based aid.

The ninth child in a family of 13 children, Wayland Thatch was born in 1920 in the hardscrabble Ozarks community of Wheatland, Missouri. His father died when he was 6. Nobody in Wheatland was rich, but at Christmas and Thanksgiving the other families in town would take bags of food and leave them on the porch of the Thatch household. The older children worked, three children died, and somehow the rest of the family got by.



Wayland Thatch, circa 1940s

"Dad graduated from high school in 1938 with good grades but no thoughts of college," explained his son, Robert Thatch. The superintendent of schools told him that Northwest Missouri State Teacher's College in Maryville needed laborers to help build new dormitories. They decided to take two young men from each county in the state and let them attend college for free if they would help build the dormitories.

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Wayland Thatch hitchhiked to Maryville and became a new man: first an accountant, then a public school teacher, and later, a community college professor. He earned two college degrees, and all of his children and grandchildren went to college as well.

All his adult life, his son said, "he felt very proud to have gone to college—and very lucky to have finished."

As Thatch worked to educate future generations of his family, the federal government began work to ensure that more than a lucky few of the working class could go to college. The story of government's role in promoting access to college demonstrates how far we have come—and points to the gaps that remain today.

The year was 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson launched his War on Poverty initiatives, some of which would be incorporated into the landmark Higher Education Act of 1965. Johnson was delivering a speech at Brown University in September of 1964 when he summed up the emerging national view of the role of education in society:

"The answer for all our national problems, the answer for all the problems of the world, comes down, when you really analyze it, to one single word—education."

Prior to the mid-'60s, the doors of the nation's colleges and universities were not easily opened. Change had occurred slowly, incrementally, with each new step seeking to extend higher education to people who'd previously been excluded.

In its infancy, higher education in America was the reserve of the privileged, and its original mission was to develop religious and government leaders. Gradually, that mission grew to meet the needs of a growing industrial economy, providing educated, skilled workers to fuel economic development and national defenses.

The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, one of the federal government's first commitments to advancing higher education, gave land to each state for the development of state colleges specializing in agriculture and the mechanical arts. The theory was this: The more highly trained individuals we have, the better our general economy; and the better our economy, the better our national defenses and our position as a global competitor.

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The GI Bill of 1944 was born of the government's desire to compensate World War II veterans and help them catch up with their peers who didn't serve in the war. Four million returning veterans took advantage of the GI Bill's tuition benefits, revealing an untapped demand for postsecondary education and demonstrating the power of financial aid in opening college doors.

In the '60s, higher-education access became part of the great sweep of social legislation known as the War on Poverty.

The Higher Education

Act of 1965 created not only the Guaranteed Student Loan but also featured the first program of "Educational Opportunity Grants," reserved for students of exceptional financial need. Between 1956 and 1966, federal expenditures for higher education mushroomed from \$655 million, targeted primarily for research, to \$3.5 billion, spread over a variety of programs, including need-based financial aid.

Senator Claiborne Pell (D-Rhode Island), watched with concern as the Vietnam War forced the government to contract, rather than expand, its Great Society commitments in the late '60s. Although college enrollment figures had quadrupled from 1940 to 1963, Pell worried about the huge college-participation gaps that remained by income, race, and region. By the late '60s, a college-age child from a family with an income of more than \$15,000 was five times more likely to go to college than a kid from a family with an income of less than \$3,000.

Pell chaired the Senate subcommittee that was responsible for shepherding the 1972 Education Amendments into law, creating the Basic Educational Opportunity Grant (renamed the Pell Grant in 1980). Designed to be a kind of "GI Bill for Everybody," the Pell Grant represented the government's first broad moral commitment to giving poor people access to higher education. Coming on the heels of the community-college system expansion and the creation of college-outreach programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search, it was supposed to be the cornerstone of educational access in America.

"The answer for all our national problems, the answer for all the problems of the world, comes down, when you really analyze it, to one single word—education." —President Lyndon B. Johnson

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Although these programs still exist, the government's commitment to them has eroded—both monetarily and philosophically. The real value of the Pell Grant peaked in the late '70s, and efforts to make college what Pell called a "matter of right" have shifted dramatically in the past 20 years. More than 30 million students have received Pell Grants since the program's inception in 1972, but several trends have significantly watered down the program's intended impact.

The past two decades have seen college aid drift from a grant-based system to a loan-based system. In the '70s, more than two-thirds of federal aid came in the form of grants; today, more than two-thirds comes in the form of loans. The Middle-Income Student Assistance Act of 1978 raised the ceiling of income eligibility for Pell Grants, spreading limited funds even more thinly, and subsequent legislation has sought to make skyrocketing tuitions more affordable for middle-income voters.

Since 1980, adjusted for inflation, average tuition has more than doubled while the value of the top Pell award dropped 25 percent (the maximum Pell award is currently \$3,125). "There's been a complete refocusing of the financial-aid system away from the people who need the money most," explains Tom Mortenson, a senior scholar for the Council for Opportunity in Education. The explosion of student loans wasn't designed to exclude low-income students, but that has been the effect. According to Mortenson's research, poor people are much less willing, by almost 50 percent, to attend college on borrowed money than their wealthier counterparts.

"Loans are not a substitute for grants for poor kids; they're barriers," Mortenson explains. "Poor people are afraid of debt."

More recently, merit-based scholarships, tuition tax credits, and prepaid college-savings plans have worked their way to the front burner of college-financing politics. "In the big-picture view of things, in the last couple of decades we've seen a real resistance to all kinds of social programs, from welfare to affirmative action, to an unwillingness to expand the investment in need-based aid," explains George Washington University research professor Tom Wolanin, a former Department of Education official and congressional staff aide.

In 1997, President Clinton announced his Hope Scholarship and Lifetime Learning initiatives, tuition tax credits that critics view as deliberately excluding

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the poor. Low-income families typically don't earn enough to benefit from tax breaks, and they can't afford the initial outlay of tuition in the first place (tax credits work retroactively, long after the first batch of tuition payments are due).

"Education department officials would pooh pooh the notion that the Administration should have emphasized Pell

Grants instead of tuition tax credits by saying that a substantial increase in the Pell Grant 'wasn't in the cards,' " Wolanin says. "But the truth is, it's not in the cards because they don't put it in the cards.

"The White House has chosen to spend its political capital on tax relief for the middle class rather than opportunities for low-and lower-middle income. To seriously remedy this situation, you'd need to start with a commitment from the president."

Far more than in 1964, today's political leaders seem nearsighted, using surveys and polls to chart their course. Thus, we've witnessed the creation of programs targeted to middle-class voters—designed by political consultants to get their bosses re-elected.

The GI Bill went to veterans who *deserved* a government boost. The Pell Grant went to low-income students who *needed* a boost. Now, explains policy analyst Tom Mortenson, "The money is not going to people who either deserve it or need it; it's going to people who simply *want* it."

"That's why I say we've gone from a need-based financial-aid system to a greed-based financial-aid system."

Over the next 15 years, it is predicted, the prime college-age group will grow by nearly 25 percent, a boom education experts call Tidal Wave II. Roughly two-thirds of that increase will come from students like Theresa Robertson and Wayland Thatch: low-income whites, immigrants, and minorities who cannot attend college at all without significant government aid.

How this country deals with Tidal Wave II will have vast implications for both rich and poor. The demand for highly skilled workers continues to rise dramat-

"The money is not going to people who either deserve it or need it; it's going to people who simply want it."
—Tom Mortenson

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ically. In today's increasingly global economy, shortages are already evident. Not only is education still the bridge over this country's cultural and economic divide, it's also the key to maintaining America's economic health.

"In exactly the same way that individuals and families have to manage their investments to get the greatest rate of return, society also has to manage its investments to get the greatest social return," Mortenson adds. "When we squander our resources on people who don't need them—and deny them to people who do—we diminish the future welfare of this country.

"It is absolutely, mathematically certain that this is the consequence of what we're doing now by not broadening educational opportunity and closing the economic gaps."

While top leadership has been lacking, there hasn't been a groundswell of leadership from the bottom up, either, with high school and college students remaining largely silent in the debate. "I'm not getting any sense of public outrage or concern about this," Wolanin says.

In the '70s, Wolanin recalls, high-school hallways were wallpapered with posters that read, in effect, "Uncle Sam wants you to go to college." Pell Grants and other need-based aid programs were more frequently touted by teachers, guidance counselors, and outreach workers. A lack of public awareness about need-based aid among the poor, combined with a lack of support for college-outreach programs such as Upward Bound (which only reaches 1 percent of its target population), likewise contribute to today's college-participation gap: A young person

Roughly two-thirds of Tidal Wave II will come from students like Theresa Robertson and Wayland Thatch: low-income whites, immigrants, and minorities who cannot attend college at all without significant government aid.

raised in an affluent household is six times more likely to earn an undergraduate degree by age 28 than one raised in a low-income household.

Kids don't go to college because they're poor, and they stay poor because they don't go to college. Thus, the economic gap widens—and the disconnect between rich and poor grows ever more vast.

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Wolanin recalls a recent visit to his high school in Detroit, now a predominantly minority, low-income school. "I was speaking to a class, and I was talking about student aid, and they were all looking at me like I was from Mars," he says. Not only were they unaware of the political shifts in need-based aid, they weren't aware of the programs, period.

The Student Aid Alliance, a newly formed umbrella of more than 60 college associations, hopes to organize support for need-based aid—from the ground up. Many of the case studies analyzed for this report can be found in full on the alliance's Web site (<http://studentaidalliance.org>). People are also encouraged to share their own stories of student-aid success through the Web site.

"Our biggest obstacle in all this is the cynicism that exists about the federal government," says Sarah Flanagan, a lobbyist for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and an alliance organizer. "The folks here who are putting together these [student-aid] programs think they're successful, but they don't hear back from the individuals, so it's a black hole."

The following stories are examples of need-based aid and early intervention at work. They illustrate the elements essential to the success of first-generation college students.

The Importance of Early Awareness of Higher Education and Financial Aid

Toni Rhorer has dedicated her career to helping first-generation college students succeed. But her passion for the subject wasn't born of textbooks; it came from personal experience.

Toni grew up in the Bavarian village tourist town of Leavenworth, Washington. Her father was a logger; her mother worked on and off waiting tables at restaurants and packing fruit at orchard warehouses. Her parents didn't attend college, nor did any of her four siblings—a sister and a brother dropped out of high school.

But from the very beginning, Toni loved school and earned good grades. She used to win Perfect Attendance Awards at the end of the school year, and her teachers always praised her work.

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By the time she was 16, a difficult family situation led to Toni's move to another town and another school district, where she lived with an older sibling. Financially, she was on her own. Although she'd always planned to go to college, she didn't know how or where. A high school guidance counselor wasn't much help—although she did mention that federal financial aid was available. Still, Toni's financial aid form was repeatedly rejected by colleges because she couldn't access her mother's income tax documents.

Deferring her dream of a college education, Toni moved to Massachusetts to work as a nanny. It was her first experience living among the upper-middle class. The family she worked for took her on vacations—to Puerto Rico, to Florida, to the Bahamas. She learned to ski “and all this other stuff I'd never done because I couldn't afford it.”

She began taking community college classes, paying for it with her salary. Then a fellow student recommended she apply to the University of Arizona. Toni Rhorer didn't know a soul in Arizona when she packed most of her belongings into a few suitcases and boarded an airplane for Tucson in 1991. She recalls walking into the college financial aid office—not even sure how much aid she'd be getting, or how much she'd have to pay to cover the rest. “I had no idea what I was getting into,” she says.

But she remembers her reaction when someone behind a computer said she owed the college \$3,400. “To me that was huge,” she says. And furthermore, she had only \$1,500 to her name.

She walked to a pay phone in the student union and called the mother of the family she'd worked for. “I was crying and asking her, ‘What am I gonna do?’ ” She hoped the woman would offer her her old job and tell her to fly back. Instead, her old boss encouraged her to work it out. Toni trudged to the bursar's office and found out—to her astonishment—that she owed exactly \$792. She would receive Pell Grants for the next four years, and she would take out \$20,000 in Stafford Student Loans. She would also work two, sometimes three, jobs at a time.

Toni got her bachelor's degree in English education and went on to receive her master's from North Carolina State University in counselor education with an emphasis on student development in higher education. She calls her undergraduate

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experience a turning point. "It was probably the best experience I could ever have." Based on her own experience and her work teaching high school English, she notes these common obstacles among promising but disadvantaged high schoolers:

- A lack of knowledge about college in general and financial aid in particular: "A lot of poor kids are bright and motivated, but they have nobody in their families to give them the information about college," she says. Many poor kids can't imagine aspiring to college because they don't know there's financial aid out there that would allow them to attend.
- A lack of awareness among high school guidance counselors and teachers: Some bright students get labeled as being "not college material" as early as middle school. This pigeonholing can have long-lasting—and troubling—effects.
- The lack of staffing among high school guidance departments: "At the school I taught in, there were 500 freshmen and one counselor, and that person was bombarded with discipline problems. They have exactly enough time to go into every class one time and say, 'Here's the track for you.'" The problem is, sometimes they're wrong. And often times they forget to mention financial aid altogether.

Toni is continually surprised by the similarities among the first-generation students she's worked with: Most knew nothing about financial aid and had difficulty following the application process; most of their parents were of little help.

Indeed, the case studies for this article echo Toni's sentiment. Of the 23 people interviewed, more than

half said they were stunned, initially, to learn that programs such as the Pell Grant existed.

"A lot of poor kids are bright and motivated, but they have nobody in their families to give them the information about college." —Toni Rohrer

None of Gene Alan Dooley's friends or family members understood college financing, and none of his teachers thought to clue him in either. Alan grew up poor in Roanoke, Virginia, the seventh of nine kids. His father was an alcoholic who worked off and on. His mother tried to manage the kids and the house, "but there was too much crazy stuff going on."

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"I missed a lot of school growing up," he says. "Growing up like that, you are pretty much on your own. Growing up like that, you end up way down before you even get a chance to get up."

All nine children dropped out of high school; most of Alan's six sisters were married and had children by the age of 16. When asked about his childhood goals, Alan shrugs—as if you've just asked if he could fly to the moon. "When you're living week to week, goals don't ever enter your mind."

He recalls driving past the students walking to classes at Virginia Western Community College. In his early twenties, when he got his GED, he remembers thinking, "Maybe I could be one of those students, too, some day."

In 1993, he was married and supporting four children—working full-time at a welding factory, where he made \$90 a week—when he finally took the plunge and enrolled at Virginia Western. He's not sure exactly how he got it in his head to attend college. He'd always heard that "college was supposed to be the way up," but he'd never had anyone in high school encourage him to go. "If you're not considered 'college material,' you're sort of steered into vocational instead."

Then, a lawyer he knew not only challenged him to attend, the man also offered to pay for his first class. "It was a fluke, and I think that little bit of encouragement was what pushed me to go," he says. "But it was scary."

Alan never took the lawyer up on his offer of payment. Instead, he continued working—hanging sheet rock and delivering newspapers—and attended classes between shifts. He's been awarded maximum Pell Grants, some Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and he's taken out \$25,000 in Stafford Student Loans.

"I was very surprised that there were grants available; they never tell you about that in high school," he says. "I'm not sure I would've gone as far as I have without the Pell Grant—I'd be just too far in the hole." Alan earned a 4.0 grade-point average at Virginia Western and graduated with an associate degree in general studies in 1997.

He wanted so badly to do well in college that he used to make up quizzes for himself. He'd read his quizzes into a cassette tape, and then listen and respond to the tapes during his 4 a.m. newspaper delivery routes in the car. The sun

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would be coming up over nearby Tinker Mountain, and there Alan would be—driving along and talking to himself about the pertinent themes of *The Great Gatsby* or the molecular components of cells. He did so well, in fact, that he was awarded a \$10,000 Oberley Scholarship from Roanoke College, the private liberal arts college he currently attends. “For me, getting educated has been like entering a new world,” he says. “You find out there’s a whole world out there that’s so different than where you’re from.”

“I reckon that by going to college I had something to prove, to the people I come from—and to myself.”

Because the transition from poverty to the middle class is so monumental, first-generation students often have a hard time sharing their stories with others. After all, being poor—or even having been poor—is still nothing to be proud of in America.

Perhaps for that reason, Alan had a hard time articulating his story and admitted, after seeing a draft (written for the Student Aid Alliance project), that he cried when he read it. “I know—men aren’t supposed to do that,” he said, half-joking.

Other people interviewed for the project had similar reactions—which may help explain why so few people have endeavored to tell their

“For me, getting educated has been like entering a new world. You find out there’s a whole world out there that’s so different than where you’re from.”

—Gene Alan Dooley

stories. Even Theresa Robertson, the recent Harvard graduate, said she was glad to share her story, with hopes that it could help the cause of financial aid reform. “But please don’t show this to my parents if you don’t have to,” she said. “I think they’re kind of wishing the whole mess around me and Harvard and stuff would be over with.”

The Ability to Break From Family Patterns

Several of the people interviewed for this project spoke of their need to distance themselves from the poverty they’d grown up in before they could pursue their goals. In some cases, it was a matter of time; in others, geography.

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In Virginia Key's case, both geography and time were factors in her college enrollment. She was 18 years old when she followed a friend from her northern Virginia hometown to Biloxi, Mississippi. She supported herself by working two fast-food jobs: answering phones for a Pizza Hut delivery service, and working the food-prep and drive-through lines at a Taco Bell. A product of blue-collar parents—her mother was a hairdresser, her stepfather an auto-sales parts manager—Virginia had never seriously considered getting a four-year college degree.

"To me, it was something that mostly other people did—kids who had wealthy parents, the 'in crowd,'" she says.

Her goal during the fast-food phase of her life was to work in data processing. Her reason: "I just wanted to do something, anything, where I could make more than minimum wage."

A friend suggested she attend a nearby community college and told her she just might qualify for financial aid. She recalls seeing her first college bill, a column of inexplicable numbers and fees. "I was so scared there were going to be hidden costs. I remember seeing something called a 'matriculation fee,' and I had to go and look that word up. It was all real intimidating to me."

Pell Grants paid virtually all of her community college expenses, although she still had to work both jobs to pay her rent and utilities. She began to excel in computer programming, and was encouraged by her first husband to aim higher than a job processing data. "He was the first person who recognized my talents and encouraged me to develop my mind. He was one of those who believed, 'If you could find it in a book, you could do anything.'"

Virginia quit her fast-food work and got a better-paying job teaching aerobics. "I started finding a lot of worth in myself in my grades." She noticed that the accounting field was booming—and that the salary accountants earned far out-ranked those who typed data into computers. Her grade-point average was 3.9, and before long, "I started feeling pretty cocky that I could do anything with my education."

She transferred to the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, enrolling in the accounting program with the goal of finishing her bachelor's degree in just four semesters—taking 18 to 21 credit hours per term. She took

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out National Direct Student Loans (now called Perkins loans) so she wouldn't have to work; Pell Grants continued to pay most of her tuition expenses.

She remembers clearly her entree into the white-collar world: She had gotten her first MasterCard so she could charge a navy-blue interviewing suit, an off-white blouse, and a pair of blue pumps. A headhunter had coached her: "You look right, and you have the right kind of personality once you start talking, but you don't interview very well."

Key recalls: "He actually said to me, 'Answer the interviewer's question, then you ask another question. That's how you make a conversation.'"

She drove a 1981 Sunbird worth less than \$500 to an interview in Houston, seven hours away. Virginia had never set foot inside a business building until she showed up seeking an accounting job at Houston's Service Corporation International. "It was that whole upper-middle class world that I was clueless about."

She landed the internal auditing job at SCI, then a Fortune 500 company, earning \$24,000 a year—about \$7,000 more than either of her parents had ever made. From there she went to the University of Southern

She drove a 1981 Sunbird worth less than \$500 to an interview in Houston, seven hours away. Virginia Key had never set foot inside a business building until she showed up seeking an accounting job at Houston's Service Corporation International. "It was that whole upper-middle class world that I was clueless about."

Mississippi to work as a staff auditor. In 1992, she became a Certified Public Accountant, and in 1997, she moved to Montana State University in Bozeman and soon became a staff auditor.

Now the director of internal audit for the four-campus, 18,000-student university, Virginia Key earns \$48,000 a year. She's remarried, she's become a Certified Fraud Examiner, and she's doubled her salary—all in 10 years.

The 36-year-old has also repaid her entire student-loan debt. She is proud that she pays nearly \$10,000 in income taxes per year, which amounts to far more than she ever received in financial aid.

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"My education has transformed my life, totally," she says. "Had I not gotten into college and found out that I was smarter than the average bear, I could very well be right at the poverty level now, making minimum wage."

"There were members of my family who didn't understand....I was not always encouraged to make education a priority."
—Virginia Key

"I had been about as low as a person can go emotionally, and I was on the social rung just above welfare. There were mem-

bers of my family who didn't understand what a powerful transformation education could cause in a person's life. Their perception was that the only way to improve your life was to work for somebody as hard as you can. They didn't perceive education as work. I was not always encouraged to make education a priority."

Roanoke native Betty Swaggerty found herself in a similar situation—only her family's poverty and lack of awareness about education were more pronounced than Key's. For that reason, Betty waited decades before pursuing her dream of attending college.

Betty wasn't only the first in her family to go to college; she was the first to finish high school when she graduated in 1966. She had made good grades in school and at one point was placed in a class for gifted students. Still, attending college was out of the question. Back then, the door to higher education was virtually closed to poor and working-class people; the Pell Grant and other forms of need-based aid hadn't yet been created.

"I grew up real, real poor, as in dirt floors, a johnny house [outhouse], the whole bit," she says. Neither of her parents graduated from high school, and her mother didn't make it out of the third grade. There are still grown members of her extended family who can not read.

"In my family, poverty was like a chain they kept you in," she says. "It's an Appalachian syndrome, I guess. It takes all your energy just to get by, to live."

Betty is 52 years old now and a grandmother. She and her insurance-salesman husband live in Boones Mill, Virginia. They raised two children, and managed to put their daughter through both undergraduate school and veterinary school, with the help of Pell Grants, student loans, and part-time jobs. "She was raised

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with the value of education. I stressed it from the time they were little; she knew from the time she was 10 that she wanted to be a vet."

When her children were young, Betty worked as a clerk for the General Electric factory in Salem, Virginia. She spent the following 10 years running a licensed day-care facility in her home, earning \$10,000 a year.

At age 49, as she tells it, "God gave me a calling to get out of my familiar, comfortable place." She'd always wanted to be an elementary-school teacher; her dream was to teach children to learn how to read. Already the recipient of an associate degree in early childhood education from Virginia Western Community College, Betty went back to Virginia Western to work toward her bachelor's degree. Maximum Pell Grant awards paid all her tuition costs.

She remembers seeing an ad in the newspaper for an adult-degree program at Hollins University called Horizon. But her impression of the private liberal arts college was that it was "way beyond my reach—\$15,000 a year to me was astronomical." (Hollins tuition is now just below \$23,000 a year.)

A combination of federal, state, and Hollins aid made the leap possible. Betty continued receiving Pell Grants, plus a state grant for private college students. Hollins also kicked in a substantial donor-funded grant for Horizon students that pays nearly half of her tuition costs. She figures she'll owe about \$15,000 in student loans by the time she graduates.

"It's truly a dream come true for me," she says of attending Hollins, where she's earning a 3.4 grade-point average. Betty still plans to pursue a job as a first-grade or kindergarten teacher.

"As a young girl, I used to play teacher all the time," she recalls. "It is still my dream to teach young children how to read. I'm never happier than when I'm working with children."

"When I think back on the poverty I came from, I feel like a millionaire now." —Betty Swaggerty

Putting her daughter through veterinary school and attending a private college herself, Betty remains grateful for the opportunities she's sought and received—and for the financial assistance that made it possible.

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Although she's far from rich, she says, "When I think back on the poverty I came from, I feel like a millionaire now."

The Importance of Peers

When families can't be counted upon to nurture their children's interest in education, sometimes peers and other members of the community can pick up the slack—in the best-case scenarios, anyway. The remarkable story of Khuong Dinh, a Vietnamese boat person who emigrated to the United States in 1984, illustrates the power of a positive peer group in an impressionable young person's life.

Khuong doesn't remember thinking he might die the night he and his family—and 53 other Vietnamese boat people—left the village of My Tho in a 15-foot-



Khuong Dinh

long fishing boat handcrafted by his aunt. He remembers Communist Army soldiers chasing them through the rice paddies. He remembers bullets being fired. He remembers his aunt dumping the compass, and food and water rations off the side of the boat. If they were caught, the plan went, they would insist they were just out fishing, not trying to escape.

To a 7-year-old boy, it seemed like a big adventure. The adults were forced to navigate by the sun, and ended up missing their destination of Malaysia. Five days later, they were lost, thirsty, and hungry. Four cruise ships passed them out in the Pacific, but only one stopped by to throw over a net full of water, Danish cookies, and Coke. It was Khuong's first taste of soda and cookies; he remembers it well.

The next day they reached an island in Indonesia, where the natives helped them arrange transportation to the refugee camp of Galang. It was April 1984. Khuong and his family spent three years in the camp, studying English and American culture. When he was 10, he flew to Seattle, where he experienced several firsts: taking a shower, jumping on a mattress in a Holiday Inn, watching a 25-inch TV, seeing his first cartoon (*The Smurfs*).

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If the first 10 years of Khuong's life were full of adventure, the next 10 would be no less daunting. Khuong, his brother and his mother moved to Salem, Virginia, when he was in the fourth grade. They had cousins there who had emigrated earlier, and the extended family shared a duplex.

But Khuong's mother never settled into American life. She moved around the country routinely, taking Khuong and his brother with her. Khuong attended six schools in four different states in the fourth and fifth grades.

Khuong was 12 when he decided he needed stability and asked his Virginia cousins if he could move back in with them. He describes the period from the sixth to tenth grades as the happiest of his life. The community he created for himself then—with the help of his extended family and several key teachers and friends—completely changed the course of his life, he says.

"We didn't have a lot—we lived on less than \$13,000 a year, but I wouldn't trade anything for that time in my life. My cousins never complained, they just kept working hard. They taught me about the value of education through their actions. In a sense, we all grew up together." —Khuong Dinh

He lived with his eldest cousins, who were in their twenties and working their way through community college (they have since all become successful engineers). Three adults shared one car, an old Volkswagen Scirocco, meticulously coordinating work and school schedules. "We didn't have a lot—we lived on less than \$13,000 a year, but I wouldn't trade anything for that time in my life," Khuong says. "My cousins never complained, they just kept working hard. They taught me about the value of education through their actions. In a sense, we all grew up together."

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Khuong was 16 when his mother returned to Virginia with Khuong's 7-year-old half-brother and—surprise—a 6-month-old half-sister. Now battling depression, she had a hard time keeping minimum-wage jobs and still could barely speak English. "I was trying to keep everything together," Khuong says, recalling a schedule that included school, soccer practice, and a job in a video store. He didn't get to his homework most nights till midnight.

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Nonetheless, with the help of several key people in the community, Khuong excelled in high school, graduating with a 3.3 grade-point average, a full load of Advanced Placement Program® (AP®) courses and a slot on the Homecoming Court as prince. His high school math teacher Barbara Jones recalls: "It was obvious he had both a great mind and a great personality." Jones's son, Bryan, had been close friends with Khuong for years. Her husband, Dean, was his soccer coach on a traveling team. Khuong regularly spent the night at the Joneses' home.

Once, when Khuong's mother had been arrested for shoplifting, Barbara was asked to take the kids to jail to visit their mom. "She wouldn't see them," Barbara recalls. "Khuong just sat there in my front seat, big tears rolling down his face."

Soon after, the three children moved in with the Joneses. Barbara and Khuong, now 21, share legal custody of the younger siblings, who are 6 and 13. "I call Bryan and Khuong my twins," Barbara says, laughing. Khuong is short with black hair, while Bryan is blond and six-foot-four.

Khuong was accepted to attend both Roanoke College and Longwood College in Virginia. He opted for Longwood because the full financial aid package he received there pays a larger portion of the total state-college bill.

Now a senior at Longwood, Khuong receives full Pell Grants, as well as a number of scholarships from local businesses and associations and from Longwood. He has not had to take out student loans and earns his spending money by tutoring other students and trading stocks on the Internet. He considers textbooks a waste of money and so doesn't purchase them—relying instead on his incredible memory, meticulous class notes, and occasional photo copies of math problems from friends.

A math major and physics minor, Khuong wants to teach math in Salem upon graduation. His goal is to get an apartment for both himself and his teenage brother—close enough to the Joneses so they can visit their 6-year-old sister, Laura, regularly. "This is really our home more than any place else," he says of the Joneses' house. "My mom loves us, but Barbara takes care of everything. I keep thinking, what does this woman owe us from a past life?"

His motivation for teaching is to "help pay back the community for all it's done for my family," from giving him scholarships to rides home from soccer practice.

There was a time during his senior year when he lived alone right next to Salem High—the children had been placed in temporary foster care, and his mother was in jail. “If I missed getting to class in the morning, the teachers would come to my door and wake me up,” he recalls. “That’s the kind of support I’ve gotten from this community. I would be nowhere without it.”

The Critical Role of Mentors and College Outreach .

Khuong Dinh was fortunate enough to have the support of an inordinately kind extended family and community of supporters. But what about those youngsters who don’t meet that lucky someone? What about those whose teachers don’t (literally and figuratively) take them in?

Father Jim Nadeau had a teacher in the eighth grade who inspired him—but not in a positive way. “It was in an English class, and we were diagramming sentences, and I wasn’t getting it,” the Catholic priest recalls. “The teacher said that I was ‘dumb, French trash’ and that I’d ‘always be dumb French trash.’”

She must have been having a frustrating day, Father Jim explains without bitterness. “But that turned out to be a motivating thing for me.”

Father Jim Nadeau grew up in a working class Franco-American family, one of three children, in the remote northern Maine town of Caribou. His mother had dropped out of school in the eighth grade; his father, the fourth. The entire family worked on a potato farm.

It was a life driven by the seasons: heaping rocks out of dirt in spring, tending crops in summer, digging up harvests in fall, bagging potatoes in winter. Father Jim signed up for the federally funded outreach program called TRIO in his sophomore year of high school and spent a summer attending Bowdoin College’s Upward Bound program. “TRIO pays for after-school tutors, they get you fee waivers for applications and entrance tests, and they write their own recommendations.”



Father Jim Nadeau

Because of TRIO’s hand-holding and motivation, Father Jim worked his way into the Ivy League. He attended Dartmouth, which cost \$20,000 a year at the time,

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on financial aid and scholarships that covered all but the \$3,000 he had to take out in student loans.

He graduated from Dartmouth in 1983 in the top quartile of his class. He had begun college with aspirations of becoming a doctor but switched to religion and theology after hearing the Pope speak in Boston his freshman year. "It was an eye-awakening experience," he recalls of seeing the Pope. "It got me thinking. I searched the sands in my heart to find that ultimate value of service, and that's where I am now."

Father Jim went from Dartmouth directly to grad school. He earned two graduate degrees in theology at the prestigious Gregorian university run by the Jesuits at the Vatican.

He studied for five years in Europe, including a semester in France and one in Scotland. While in the seminary, he also studied Hebrew in Jerusalem for a time, spent a summer at a refugee camp in North Africa, backpacked through a desert, and traveled across Europe. He met Mother Teresa in 1984 and worked with her sisters for a while.

"I've been blessed in so many ways. I look back on it, and if it hadn't been for Upward Bound and TRIO, none of this would have happened."

—Father Jim Nadeau

Now 38, Father Jim is rector of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, a 1,000-family church in Portland, Maine. He was

named to the post at the age of 32, the youngest priest in the state's history to achieve that position. He has been an altar server for Pope John Paul II twice. He has heard the Pope speak publicly on several occasions, and the two of them have spoken in person as well. "I told him it was because of his talk in Boston [in 1979] that I'd decided to become a priest. He patted me on the shoulder and, almost crying, he said, 'Be a good priest' in his big Polish accent."

Looking back on it now, Father Jim credits his college experience—fueled by Upward Bound and financial aid—with making his career possible. "I'm looking at my wall in front of me now," he says in a telephone interview. "And I'm looking at the hundreds of pictures of people—from weddings I've performed, from baptisms."

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He reads a quote he has posted amid his office pictures. It's from "Hymn of the Universe," by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: "One by one I see and I love all those whom you have given me to sustain and to charm my life."

Father Jim has become an outspoken advocate for need-based aid and TRIO, and he makes every effort to reach out to promising poor kids who attend his parish and school. Susan Collins, the junior senator from Maine, invokes Father Jim's story frequently on the Senate floor as an example of what Pell and TRIO programs can do.

Father Jim doubts he would have gone to college at all without the programs. "All things are possible, but I fear I would have not taken out loans to go. I don't even like loans now," he says.

"I've been blessed in so many ways," he says. "I look back on it, and if it hadn't been for Upward Bound and TRIO, none of this would have happened."



Kacelia Ferrell

Kacelia Ferrell, 24, has used her college education to pursue a different kind of ministry: working with at-risk kids in the inner city. Like Father Jim, she grew up in an environment where college just wasn't something most people did. She lived in Hurt Park, a housing development in Roanoke, Virginia, with a high rate of school dropouts and teen pregnancy.

Although her parents pushed education—Kacelia's older sister graduated from Radford University, the recipient of a basketball scholarship—Kacelia recalls a couple of times when she might not have made it to and through college without the guidance of Kaye Hale, the director of the nearby West End Center, an after-school program that Kacelia attended from the age of 10 and where she now works.

In high school, she was failing chemistry class when Hale arranged a tutor for her—and she ended up with a B. Hale also helped with financial aid forms and SAT preparation. "My parents were pretty supportive, but most of the parents in

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the inner city aren't as knowledgeable about education. With me, I had everybody coaching me in terms of what to take for college; everybody was working together to make sure all the pieces fit."

"We all need someone who's that backbone person in our lives; someone who tells you 'You can do this, and it's okay if you mess up if you still keep trying.'"

—Kacelia Ferrell

Two of Kacelia's brothers died at the age of 22—one, in a car wreck; the other was shot. "My oldest brother was shot when I was in high

school, and Kaye was right there for me," she recalls. Still, her transition to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond wasn't easy. Entering early, the summer after high school graduation, was a critical move for her, she believes—giving her the chance to settle into college life before the mass of students arrived. Kacelia was a college junior when she lost her second brother. She considered dropping out of college, but Kaye Hale pushed her to go back.

"Every time I came home, she gave me a care package of school supplies; she wrote me letters at school," Kacelia recalls. "She let me call her on the phone day or night. Her influence really made the difference. I knew that I had all these people; that if anything happened to me, they have my back [her trust], and I didn't want to let them down.

"In some instances three or four hands working is better than one," she says, recalling a friend from her neighborhood who attended Hampton University one semester and dropped out. Even though she was a participant in Upward Bound, "I think she just felt too alone. It's hard for inner-city kids to go to that structure. At least back at home you have some support."

Based on her personal experience and her work as mental health coordinator for the West End Center, Kacelia believes that the two biggest roadblocks to college for inner-city kids are a lack of knowledge about financial aid and low self-esteem.

"A lot of us think the only thing we're good for is hanging out on street corners and doing whatever," she says. "But a lot of these kids on street corners are smart. They just don't have the support.

"We all need someone who's that backbone person in our lives; someone who tells you 'You can do this, and it's okay if you mess up if you still keep trying.' Once you have that backbone and that confidence in yourself, you've got it."

The Desire for Personal Growth and Enhanced Self-Esteem

Martha Richardson is a community college counselor and administrator who earned an associate degree at Piedmont Community College and then undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Virginia—beginning as a 35-year-old, newly divorced mother of three who wasn't getting a dime in child support. Without financial aid and the community college system, she believes she'd be working today as a secretary somewhere—unhappy, unfulfilled, and definitely paying a lot less in taxes.

But college success has given this former furniture-store clerk an intangible benefit that she has come to value even more than her important job and respectable income. Her education has fueled her to expand her worldview, a change that has led her to travel



Martha Richardson and her brother

abroad several times. "What you get from it are things you don't get graded on; it's an incremental kind of self-discipline and confidence and self-esteem.

"In my case, I did something that only I could do. I earned my education; nobody could give it to me. And when you do something like that, you know ...you can do anything."

Martha frequently counsels adult first-generation students who fear they can't afford the reduced work hours, increased child care, and student loans associated with going to college; people who aren't aware of the power of education to transform lives. "I tell the students here, 'You have to know yourself well enough to believe that you will finish your degree and be able to get a job that enables you to pay the loans back. You have to invest in yourself.' "

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One of her most memorable students was Sandra Palmer, a woman who had lost her 26-year job as an Eastern Airlines flight attendant when the airline folded in 1991. She was a divorced mother of two teenage sons, a 46-year-old woman who had grown tired of hearing, "You have no marketable skills." She was also severely depressed. "I saw myself becoming a bag lady, and the fear just paralyzed me," Sandra recalls.

"Nobody had ever told her she was good at anything, but I could see how much she loved learning. She just needed help setting her sights high enough."

—Martha Richardson

By the time her unemployment ran out, she was suicidal. Soon after her sons moved in with their grandmother in Alexandria, she was

admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where she underwent treatments and therapy for six months. She was released to a Roanoke transitional-living center program for homeless people, where she lived for seven months. There, she was referred to Martha Richardson at Virginia Western, who recalls the first time she met Sandra in 1994: Sandra had always wanted to be a librarian, had always loved archaeology. But she doubted her ability to finish college, not to mention the required grad-school classes librarians must take.

"Nobody had ever told her she was good at anything," Richardson recalls. "But I could see how much she loved learning. She just needed help setting her sights high enough." Martha encouraged her to continue her classes and, when she graduated from the community college, to transfer to the University of Virginia.

In 1997, at the age of 52, Sandra became the oldest woman ever to receive a bachelor's degree in archaeology from UVA. Now 54, she's working on a master's degree in library science at the University of Maryland, which she hopes will help her launch a career combining library and archaeological work.

"More and more older women are going back to college," she says, referring to people who have been downsized and forced to change careers.

Higher education not only helps middle-aged workers who have been laid off, it can also aid in this country's effort to get more people off the welfare rolls—and into jobs that pay more than minimum wage.

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Although Elizabeth “Meribeth” Cook has been off welfare for more than five years, she recalls the experience vividly, painfully—and with more than enough insight to know she never wants to go back.

In 1991, she lived alone with her son, Evan, in a public-housing development in rural Rocky Mount, Virginia. She received Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps. She recalls one neighbor in particular: a woman who’d lived in public housing for 18 years—with her teenage children, who also had children. All were on public assistance; all were hardened and without hope.



Meribeth Cook

“They thought the world was out to get them, and there was no reason to hope for anything better,” Meribeth recalls. “Nobody’s going to school, nobody’s trying to do better—and among the very few who do, 9 out of 10 fail because it’s just so hard.”

Meribeth was determined to be the one successful person out of 10.

She had grown up in nearby rural Boones Mill, Virginia, the fourth of five children, the daughter of a high school English teacher. She earned A’s and B’s in high school—up until her senior year, when she got pregnant with Evan and had to finish up the year with a home tutor. She lived with her mom when Evan was little. And, while she always had aspirations to go to college, she went to work instead: first in a factory, then as a temp filling in for a legal secretary, then on to Wal-mart. She quit before too long, though, “because it was costing me more than my paycheck to work” by the time she paid for rent, day care, gas, and clothes.

When Evan was 3, Meribeth was accepted into a full-year program at nearby Ferrum College—on a full scholarship. But she couldn’t muster the courage or support to go, and, at the last minute, she backed out. “I was scared that I would fail, that I wouldn’t fit in. I just didn’t have enough confidence. I kick myself every day for not going. I am still so ashamed about some of the stupid things I’ve done.”

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She found herself on welfare, in public housing. She did take a course in computer skills and typing offered through a Joint Training Partnership program in Rocky Mount, along with some other women from the projects—but remembers how deflated she felt when her friend and neighbor, Cookie, became the first to go to work. Cookie tried working at Burger King for a few months, but her old car needed too many repairs, and the day care expenses for her two children were too high. (Her welfare allowance had been cut off, though she did still qualify for some reduced rent and food stamps.)

"At first I equated the Pell Grant with welfare, but now I think it's a completely different world, and I'm not ashamed of it. With a Pell Grant, you're definitely trying to better yourself."

—Meribeth Cook

Cookie eventually quit and returned to welfare.

"It wasn't very inspiring to the rest of us."

Meribeth recalls sinking into a depression and beginning to drink. She

asked her mom to let her move back home. She took a minimum-wage job at a weight-loss center, which reduced her AFDC check and some of her other benefits. Gradually, she took better jobs: first as a public-television station receptionist, then as a sales-team secretary for a historic hotel in downtown Roanoke. She earned \$18,000 a year as a secretary and cleaned houses for people on the weekends. Her public benefits were phased out completely by the time Evan was 6.

"I was working around creative people, and I wanted to express myself, too," she says. Her boss at the hotel was the first to encourage her to take classes at Virginia Western Community College. "She just kept telling me, 'There's no reason you can't do it,' and pretty soon I started believing her." A financial aid counselor told her she'd receive a Pell Grant, which would pay the full community college tuition.

The \$1,200 Pell Grant she received the first year paid for her to take two night classes and for her books. She's taken four classes so far on a part-time basis and plans to transfer to a four-year college eventually to study journalism or English. (She has a 3.33 grade-point average at Virginia Western.)

She believes the Pell Grant was crucial in pushing her further up the ladders of success and self-esteem. "I would not have gone to school without it. I just

wouldn't have pursued the red tape—and financial risk—of taking out loans. "At first I equated the Pell Grant with welfare, but now I think it's a completely different world, and I'm not ashamed of it. With a Pell Grant, you're definitely trying to better yourself."

And that betterment, she believes, will lead to a richer life for her and for her son. Evan is 10 years old now and a standout student at an environmental-education magnet school in Roanoke. "When Evan goes to college, I want to be able to pay for it myself—every dime," she says.

The Importance of Early College Success and Goal-Setting

Daphne Huffman is 47 years old, a member of her kids' PTA, and a registered nurse who works with hospital computer systems. Despite having a decent job and a comfortable family life, she still suffers from decisions that were made—and were not made—during her teenage years. "I still feel incomplete without a college degree," she says.

When she graduated from a rural southwest Virginia high school in 1970, "my parents never even considered that I'd go to college," she recalls. Her mother was raised in West Virginia during the Depression with the belief that it was a woman's sole purpose in life to marry and have children. Her father was a truck driver. Both considered college to be an unnecessary expense for women.

Daphne was frustrated when she recently learned that, in all likelihood, she would have qualified for full financial aid to attend a four-year university. Her family's lack of knowledge about financial aid and college life, along with the lack of high school guidance counseling, is typical of the information lag common among families of first-generation college students.



Daphne Huffman with her daughters

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Daphne really wanted to go to Radford University to become a physical-education teacher. She was also interested in art and design—she remembers thinking the coolest job in the world would be to design cloverleaf highway interchanges. A high school aptitude test showed she was off the charts in the fields of architecture and design. “But it never occurred to me that a woman could become an architect,” Daphne says. “The woman [who administered the aptitude test] asked me what I wanted to be, and when I said a ‘nurse,’ her face fell.”

Three years later, Daphne did become a nurse. She got her diploma through Roanoke Memorial Hospital, a program that cost \$1,900, including room and board, books, and tuition. “My grandmother’s house faced the hospital, and that was the only thing I knew about and figured I could do. So I wrote to them to ask how much it cost to attend their school of nursing.

“Becoming a nurse just seemed doable, so that’s why I did it. I don’t have a lot of confidence now, but I had none then.”

While Daphne is taking community college courses part-time, her goal is to transfer to a four-year degree program in nursing. Because of her experience as a nurse, she’s aiming for a job as a nursing administrator.

But she still struggles with her unfulfilled dream to pursue art and architecture. She’s researching a nursing bachelor’s degree—only because “it’s the most practical. I’ve got several credits from 26 years ago, plus the experience.”

Dave Reynolds grew up 25 years later than Daphne and in a different region of the country. But his early college experiences were similar—though with a very different outcome. Unlike Daphne Huffman, he had role models who steered him toward fulfilling his own dreams, and he had helpful college counselors and programmatic support.

As a freshman at the State University of New York College at Brockport, he planned to go to medical school to become a veterinarian—inspired by a life-long, unfulfilled dream of his father, who worked as a foreman at Eastman Kodak. “I’d met with my adviser only once, and I hadn’t talked to anybody else,” he recalls. “And we never had those kinds of discussions in my family about college; my parents knew nothing about it.”

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Dave returned his sophomore year, realized he was already behind in science and math, and dropped out midsemester to join the Marine Corps. "Looking back now, I realize I'd bought into my father's dream instead of my own," he says, referring to veterinary medicine.

He spent the next four years in Japan and Hawaii, specializing in signals intelligence. He worked with some of the Corps' cream-of-the-crop: "They were linguists and they'd studied Russian, and they were taking college courses on the side." Through those peers, he learned about other college opportunities and set about to reinvent himself with a new career. He enrolled part-time at Chaminade University in Hawaii. A personality test he took as part of the introductory psychology course indicated he'd make a great writer or psychologist.

When his tour was up, he moved back to New York and re-enrolled at SUNY Brockport—this time as a psychology major. Most significantly, he says, he was awarded membership in a program for first-generation college students called the Robert E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, a federal fund set up to help minorities and first-generation students pursue professions requiring graduate degrees. The program was named in honor of Dr. McNair, the African-American astrophysicist who died in the 1986 Challenger disaster.

The McNair program gave him \$500 a semester, which covered books and gas. More critically, it matched him with mentors in his field, clinical psychologists who were doing cutting-edge research and teaching. Dave assisted them on projects and was a co-author

on several papers, and made numerous oral and poster presentations at professional conferences.

He earned his master's degree in 1997 and recent-

ly defended his doctoral dissertation in clinical psychology—research into the causes and effects of patients who stay in therapy versus those who drop out. Now an Air Force captain at Andrews Air Force Base, he is working on a yearlong internship, the last step toward becoming an official clinical psychologist.

Without Pell Grants and the McNair program, Dave Reynolds says, he would have set his sights much lower than a Ph.D. In all likelihood, he wouldn't have gone to graduate school at all because he would have incurred massive loan debts as an undergraduate.

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Without Pell Grants and the McNair program, Dave says, he would have set his sights much lower than a Ph.D. In all likelihood, he wouldn't have gone to graduate school at all because he would have incurred massive loan debts as an undergraduate. He also would've had to work full-time while going to school.

"Getting financial aid frees you up to make college a better opportunity, a better experience," he says. "For most of the people who have to work full-time on top of it, it's an almost unbearable experience."

After completing his internship, Dave will work for the Air Force for at least three years. He hopes to specialize in treating combat veterans such as those from the

Gulf War. He also aspires to start his own foundation, something similar to the McNair program. "I'd like to give at least one person the opportunity to go to college without having to work."



Ana Baños and her students

Ana Baños hopes to level the educational playing field as well. A Mexican American who now teaches in the public-school system where she was raised, she frequently gives speeches about the

need for more precollege outreach programs like the one that propelled her to success. She also begins every school year by telling her story to her own high school students. "I want them to realize that it is possible to have two cultures and two languages, and that you don't have to leave one world to get to the other."

Ana recalls the day she was pulled out of her tenth-grade class. It was the second week of school, and a lady told her that if she came to a class called Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) that she would get to go to college. "I'd never been pulled out of a class for anything," recalls Ana, now 28. "And I didn't quite understand what she was saying. In my mind, she said if I joined this program then I could go to college for free."

It didn't exactly work like that, but Ana does credit her participation in AVID—an in-school precollege outreach program that targets first-generation college students—with transforming her life.

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The Baños family emigrated from Tijuana, Mexico, to San Diego, when Ana was in the third grade. Her parents had been laborers in Mexico; the family's home had no toilet or running water. "I remember writing to Santa as a kid and asking for running water, and my parents saying, 'Okay, we have to leave this country.'"

Ana did fairly well in school, even though she struggled to learn English and had some experience with racism. In the Palm City area where she was raised, "the contrasts are very drastic: The First World and Third World slam into each other." But her elementary school teachers were loving, and the public library became a safe haven. "I remember thinking that it was the coolest thing that you could just take a book home with you and they trusted you with it."

By the time she was tapped for AVID, her grades were good. "But I was still kinda clueless about high school and college. No one in my extended family had

even gone to high school, and we didn't know anything about the system." She'd never heard the word "midterm," nor did she know the name of a single college or university in San Diego. "I assumed you had to be rich to go," she says.

Her AVID teacher taught her otherwise. The class visited several colleges, and the teacher coached the students to prepare for college. "They teach you how to always be thinking about what's going to get you accepted into college. Before long, your whole life is revolving around going to college."

"Having an AVID teacher is like having a mom who went to college." And it placed her in a peer group of like-minded people. "At my high school, it was definitely not cool to be Mexican and to be smart," she says. "But we had this one class where it was cool, and that helped."

Ana went to the University of California at Berkeley, where she majored in education, and then on to Stanford for an education master's. "I had always felt this huge sense of injustice about public schools. I was always having to argue and

"They teach you how to always be thinking about what's going to get you accepted into college. Before long, your whole life is revolving around going to college. Having an AVID teacher is like having a mom who went to college." —Ana Baños

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beg to take chemistry and advanced math and honors English. So I couldn't think of anything that would be more important or would change things as much as being in education."

Her success has inspired her four younger siblings to join AVID and to graduate from college as well. "Programs like AVID that teach you to set goals and stick with them are making the playing field equal, and that's what public schools need right now more than anything—to give all kids equal opportunity."

Conclusions

The daughter of an oil truck driver and a hospital receptionist made it to Harvard—but only with the assistance of a "fairy godmother" and an extraordinary ability to tough out the kind of environment where the Gap is viewed as a discount store and "people really do have the luxury to sit around and deconstruct Marx all day."

The son of a potato farmer who'd never traveled outside of Maine has been an altar server in Rome for the Pope, has worked with Mother Teresa in India, and now has a wall full of photographs from the hundreds of weddings, baptisms, and masses he's performed. The priest credits all of it to a combination of Upward Bound college outreach and federal need-based aid.

A welfare mother leaves public assistance behind and goes to college, thanks to encouragement from a single person who tells her she's smart.

All of these stories illustrate the dramatic transformation that happens when the playing field of higher education is leveled; when suddenly it doesn't matter whether you're the son of a doctor or someone who weeds the potato rows — intellect and drive come first.

But that playing field is not yet level. In fact, the gap in college participation keeps widening with no turnaround in sight. A September 1999 study by RAND, the nonprofit research group, reported a yawning gap in educational attainment between whites and minorities. Unless policies change significantly, that gap will continue to widen, the report warned, resulting in a dwindling proportion of college-educated adults entering the workforce.

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In California alone, by the year 2015, Hispanic and African-American people will constitute 40 percent of the state's population—and 75 percent of its high school dropouts. The investments necessary to increase graduation of minorities from college would more than pay for themselves, according to the RAND study, but individual states lack the incentive to make them. Therefore, the federal government must intervene. But will it?

All of these stories illustrate the dramatic transformation that happens when the playing field of higher education is leveled; when suddenly it doesn't matter whether you're the son of a doctor or someone who weeds the potato rows — intellect and drive come first.

"You hear about Tidal Wave II from enrollment people and a few academics," says Sarah Flanagan, the lobbyist for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. "But people in politics don't think that far ahead."

Tom Wolanin, the George Washington professor, echoes that view. "It's discussed a lot, and we all wring around hands about it. But I don't sense any political commitment on anybody's part to seriously remedy the situation."

Doubling the maximum Pell Grant award would help restore the purchasing power it had in the late '70s—and truly make it a "GI Bill for Everybody." Likewise, funding for precollege outreach programs falls far short of need. It's estimated that current TRIO programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, Educational Opportunity Centers, Student Support Services, McNair Achievement) serve less than 5 percent of the eligible population.

Intervention must occur earlier, it must be more thorough, and it must reach more students. To get more poor people to college, the country needs schools committed to preparing all children for college, families that support the continuing education of their kids after high school, and precollege outreach programs beginning in middle school that offer tutoring, counseling, mentoring, and college-visitation programs.

Retired Senator Claiborne Pell, who chaired the subcommittee that shepherded the Pell Grant into law in 1972, regrets that the Pell Grant was never given entitlement status. He said in a recent interview at his home in Newport, Rhode Island, that

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he's still concerned about the shift from grants to loans. "Kids are borrowing so much money that many of them are unable to afford the jobs they want."

Getting the success stories out to the public and policymakers will help, he said. "And I think people who have a vested interest in higher education need to push harder for the program."

"We must not lose sight of this," Pell added. "The more money and more people we put into the [Pell Grant] program, the better off our country will be."

"You hear about Tidal Wave II from enrollment people and a few academics, but people in politics don't think that far ahead."

—Sarah Flanagan

All of the case studies analyzed for this article underscore Pell's point of view. But of the 23 people interviewed, more

than half barely made it to college—either via a teacher or mentor's push, a "fairly godmother" financial backer, or by scaling back their ambitions. Although most struggled to fit in among their moneyed peers, the struggle more than paid off.

Consider Suzanne Wahrle, a foster child who worked sacking groceries to put herself through Millsaps College. Named a 1999 member of *USA Today's* all-academic team, one of 20 college seniors in the nation selected for the honor, Wahrle is now working with the Mayo Clinic's Alzheimer's Research Center to isolate a combination of enzymes that may stop Alzheimer's disease from developing. She plans to devote her life to helping find a cure for Alzheimer's and other neurological diseases.

If America is the land of opportunity, she wants to know, "why is it that the biggest bridge to opportunity—education—is accessible mainly to people who have large amounts of money?"

Last year when Wahrle won her *USA Today* award, she donated some of the money to an after-school program, providing books for poor children. "I really believe in providing education for low-income people because it's the only way they're going to get out of it. I'm just baffled when privileged people say that poor people bring it upon themselves—they truly have no idea.... The system is set up right now so that the wealthier you are, the better education you get. And that makes the gap between rich and poor get wider."

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Bridging that gap—via higher education—is the only way to make America and its citizenry stronger and more productive.

If you don't believe that, consider how far Suzanne Wahrle has come: Six years ago, she was an impoverished teenager. As a college

freshman, she frequently skipped lunch to save money. Even though she was earning straight A's, "I still felt like the rug could be pulled out from under me at any moment."

Now, she's living on her own for the first time and not only making it, she's contributing to society. The only time she skips lunch is when she's too busy working in the research lab to take a break. Like nearly all of those interviewed for the project, Suzanne Wahrle has a hard time articulating just how monumental an impact higher education has made on her life: It's as if her college diploma is a license—to do anything.

"A lot of people look at their college degree as a piece of paper," she says, "but to me it is a symbol of triumph over adversity...over many of the biggest challenges of my life."

"For me, college has been the bridge to a better life."

"A lot of people look at their college degree as a piece of paper, but to me it is a symbol of triumph over adversity...over many of the biggest challenges of my life."
—Suzanne Wahrle

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She has a B.S. in journalism from Bowling Green State University and an M.A. in English/creative writing from Hollins College. A first-generation college graduate herself, she has recently had essays and articles on need-based financial aid published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *College Board Review*.

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